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# Increases in Writing Fluency through Free-Writing Journals

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## Increases in Writing Fluency through Free-Writing Journals

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### Abstract

書くことは、流暢さと正確さを必要とします。多くの場合、日本の学生は流暢さよりも正確さに焦点を当てています。学生はテストやレポートを作成するとき、文章は文法的に非常に優れていますが、彼らは書くのが遅いので、高得点を獲得することができません。タイムド・フリー・ライティングは、学生の書く速度と量を向上させると言われています。本論文では、フリー・ライティング・ジャーナルを使用して1学期中の筆記クラスにおいて、いかに流暢に早く文章を書けるようになるか、これが本論文の目的とするところです。

Writing involves fluency and accuracy. Often Japanese students focus on accuracy at the expense of fluency. When students come to take tests or write reports, although their sentences are grammatically very good, because they have so few words they cannot gain high scores. Timed free-writing has been said to improve the speed and quantity of writing that students produce. This paper aims to measure the changes in writing fluency during one semester writing class by using free-writing journals.

キーワード：ライティング、ジャーナル

Key Words: Writing, Journals

### Introduction

Historically since the 1940s when ESL entered the modern era of second language teaching there have been a variety of approaches to teaching writing in a second language. Silva (1990) describe four

main approaches; Controlled Composition, Current- Traditional Rhetoric, The Process Approach and English for Academic Purposes. Controlled Composition is an approach in which writing is highly controlled, involving mainly substitutions of carefully graded sentences. The aim is accuracy, with very little creativity, it also does not teach students how to create ideas and start their own writing. Current-Traditional Rhetoric is an approach in which the student is allowed more freedom, but the main aim is to teach students paragraph style. It teaches students how to fit sentences together to make coherent paragraphs, but with very little self-expression. There were many critics of these two approaches. The main criticism being that although students could substitute words and manipulate sentences, they were unable to produce an original piece of writing expressing their own opinions and ideas. The Process Approach was a reaction to the first two approaches in which writing is not viewed as a linear process, but rather a circular process in which the writer tries to communicate ideas and continually rewrites and improves their writing. The teacher's role is to help students generate strategies to get started, and to give guidance as to how students could improve their writing. Students need to produce their own writing before trying to write accurately. "Without fluency, the unhindered freedom to write, they will never learn to write well. And to write fluently, they must be convinced that writing is a process, recursive and messy, jotting down random thoughts imperfectly as they occur." (Fluency First for Novice Writers, 2009, p. 1) The final approach is English for Academic Purposes, in which the students are taught a variety of discourse styles and prepares students for the type of writing that needs to be done for tests and academic papers. In most Japanese Junior and Senior High schools, even today, teachers focus mainly on controlled composition. There is very little opportunity for students to express their own opinions. Thus, when students enter university, teachers need to introduce students to the idea of writing as a process and develop skills for initiating ideas and starting to write. This can be a painful process for both students and teachers. Some students have no idea how to start writing, or what they should write about. Free writing is a way to encourage students to think of their own ideas.

Free-writing has long been thought of as a good way to improve fluency in the process approach, but there is a lot of discussion as to what free writing really means. Purists say that students are instructed to write, on any topic that comes to mind, for a period of time, for example five minutes, without being concerned about grammar, spelling or punctuation. Students should be focused on ideas. Jacobs (1986) calls the same activity 'Quickwriting' he states that, "Quickwriting has three features: concentrating on content, not worrying about form, and writing without stopping." Through writing freely students can find what they want to write about. The problem with this type of free-writing is that some students sit trying to think what they should write and don't produce anything. To counteract this problem some teachers use 'focused free-writing.' In focused free writing the students are given a topic to write about, in this way it can be used as a heuristic, or for communication between teacher and student. Although focused free-writing can help students to write I still found that some of my students would just sit thinking, rather than writing anything. To prevent writer's block and encourage ideas to flow I started letting my students have five minutes to think of ideas before starting to write. Although

this might seem to be defeating the object of free writing I have found that Japanese students can write much more fluently if they have some time to check words in the dictionary before they start writing. Another aspect of free-writing is that it should not be graded by the teacher. (Free Writing, 2013) It is essential that students know that the writing will not be evaluated or criticized by the teacher in order for students to relax and let their ideas flow. (Dickson, 2001)

Some educators criticize the idea of giving students a limited period of time, however in Kroll (1990) she found that while giving students extra time to write an essay can contribute a slight improvement in syntax and rhetoric, the improvements are too small to be regarded as significant. Thus, giving more time only leads to a slight improvement especially with lower level students, who may lack sufficient knowledge to improve their writing even if they were given more time. I have also found that by giving students a relatively short time period in which to write, they focus on their writing, rather than daydreaming. Another interesting observation by Kroll (1990) is that in her group of participants; Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Persian and Spanish, the Japanese students consistently produced the shortest corpus, meaning that they produced the fewest number of words, both in the timed writing and at home. This indicates to me that Japanese students are in need of practice to increase the number of words they write in tests and on homework assignments. The majority of tests set word limits, if students cannot reach these word limits they will be penalized, even if the writing, which they produce, is of a very high quality.

I wanted to use free-writing as a heuristic, but also as a sample of the students' own writing to use for error correction in the class. Textbooks often give samples of writing for students to correct that are too difficult, so that it becomes more of a reading exercise than a writing one. I also wanted to increase my students' writing fluency. It is very common in the writing class for students to sit 'thinking' rather than getting something down on paper. Flower and Hayes (1981) cite research that 'in some cases 70% of composing time is pause time.' By which they mean that students are thinking about what they will write for 70% of the time and only writing for 30% of the time. Although Flower and Hayes (1981) see this as positive, I wanted to push my students to compose more. Hedge (1988) described free-writing as a way to overcome 'writer's block.' She states that while free-writing is very popular with some writers, others prefer to sit and think before putting pen to paper. The problem is, with time constraints on the classroom, giving students time to sit and think can lead to very little productive writing.

By introducing timed free writing into the class I wanted to increase students' writing fluency and also increase their confidence in their ability to write. You cannot learn to write without writing. Although this sounds obvious many writing textbook focus on teacher fronted classes with reading and short sentence activities, rather than students writing. Students need help in making the leap from short sentence activities to longer pieces of writing.

## **Process Writing**

In recent years more and more emphasis has been put on the process of writing and specifically how the process affects the final product. I want my students to be creative, but I would also like to exert some control, so that I can teach students a variety of styles of writing. From this point of view I introduced the topics, which then led into more controlled teaching. For example, the free-writing topic about a famous celebrity led into teaching how to writing a biographical essay about someone alive today using past and present tenses. In the student's free-writing they did not focus on which tense they were writing, after receiving instruction they had a body of work that they could rewrite.

A further benefit to this type of activity is as an aid to improving standardized test scores. Many standardized tests including Eiken, and TOEFL include a timed writing section.

For example on the TOEFL writing section;

"You have 30 minutes to plan, write, and revise your essay. Typically, an effective response will contain a minimum of 300 words." (ETS.ORG, 2013)

Three hundred words correspond to about thirty lines for the average student. The speed of writing is a serious handicap for students in this type of test. I hope that by training them to write more quickly they will score higher on these standardized tests.

In this paper I would like to look at the increase in writing speed as well as seeing which topics were more successful as free writing topics. Measuring writing fluency is very complex. Abdel Latif (2013) refers to a variety of measures of fluency including; composing rate, text quantity, creativeness, coherence and use of linguistic structures. Due to the difficulties in measuring and accurately analyzing creativeness, coherence and use of linguistic structures I have focused purely on the quantity of text produced as a measure of fluency. Despite the flaws in this methodology I wanted to analyze how each student improved over the course of the semester. After writing for five minutes students were asked to count how many lines they had written and keep a record. I decided to use the number lines rather than the number of words to save time. I also felt that it was an approximate measure of improvement. Students were strongly encouraged to focus on their own improvement, rather than compare their results with friends.

## **The Task**

In this class students were all given a writing journal, with topics decided by the teacher each week. The first five minutes involved making a quick mind map of ideas (appendix A). This was written on the page opposite the writing page, so that it could be referred to whilst writing. During this time the students could use their dictionaries and ask the teacher for advice. In the first few weeks I gave hints during this period to help students write. These were usually in the form of 'wh' questions, which I wrote in the circles for students to answer. For example in the topic 'My best friend' I wrote, 'What is

their name?’ ‘Where did you meet them?’ ‘How long have you been friends?’ ‘What do you like to do together?’ etc. When the students started writing, they were timed for exactly five minutes. They could not use dictionaries and were encouraged to write as much as possible. I gave them a full page with lines to write on. Very few students wrote more than half of the page, but I felt that it was important for them to feel that they had plenty of space to write as much as they could.

## Participants

Two writing classes in the second semester from October to December were used for this study. The first class was in the highest band of English, but none of them were English majors, although they had elected to take English for credit. Consequently their motivation was fairly high. The second class of students had also been placed in the highest proficiency English class, and all the students were English majors. For these students the writing class was compulsory, as such, the motivation was mixed, but generally very high. As the first topic was ‘Me’ a type of self-introduction, and the final topic was ‘My Family’. I felt that these were similar topics so that the improvement could be somewhat accurately measured.

## Results

Figure 1 Average Number of lines of free-writing written each week

		week1	week2	week3	week4	week5	week6	week7	week8	week9	week10	week11
N	Valid	44	40	39	39	43	44	40	44	42	42	40
	Missing	2	6	7	7	3	2	6	2	4	4	6
	Mean	8.2045	8.6500	9.1026	9.3333	10.7442	9.8182	9.4500	10.9318	10.7143	10.8333	12.0250

Valid = Number of students who wrote that free-writing topic.

Missing = Absent Students

Mean = The average number of lines written by students in both classes.

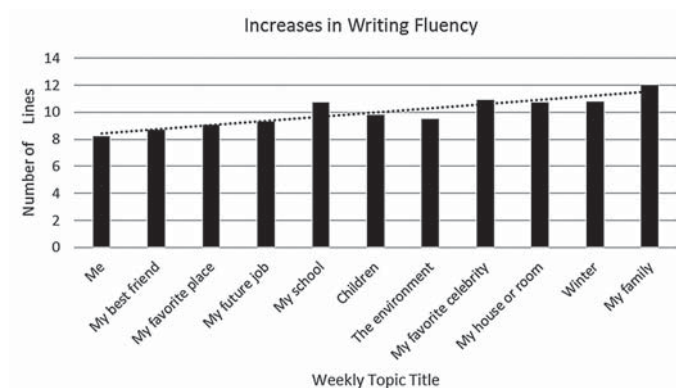


Figure 2

As can be seen in figures 1 and 2 the students have increased fairly steadily over the semester. This is similar to the findings of Hwang (2010) working in an intensive academic program. He measured words per minute and found approximately 50% increase over an eight-week period. He also found that student writing confidence and performance in writing under EAP exam conditions had increased. I also found that student writing confidence had increased as seen in the discussion quotes. Part of the increases in length of writing may be due to familiarity with the process, but I think part of this increase is due to increases in fluency, and especially an acceptance on the part of the students to try writing rather than thinking too deeply. I also found that students enjoyed the activity, and felt it to be beneficial to their English language learning. In the last class I asked the students how they had felt about free writing. Although it was a face-to-face discussion, so the students probably felt inhibited criticizing the activity, their feedback was very positive. These are some of the comments that they made:

“The topics made a big difference on how much I could write. Some topics were easy, but some topics I had no idea.”

“I used to feel afraid to write paragraphs in English, but after doing free-writing I don’t”

“I enjoyed not worrying about what grade I would get.”

“I think I can write much more quickly now. I think this will help me in tests.”

“I’m glad I could improve my writing speed.”

The comment about writing topic was the most common, and as you can see from the results graph, although there was an increase in length of writing over the semester, results varied depending

on the topic.

Week 1	Me	8.2 lines.
Week 2	My best friend	8.7 lines
Week 3	My favorite place	9.1 lines
Week 4	My future job	9.3 lines
Week 5	My school	10.7 lines
Week 6	Children	9.8 lines
Week 7	The environment	9.5 lines
Week 8	My favorite celebrity	10.9 lines
Week 9	My house or room	10.7 lines
Week 10	Winter	10.8 lines
Week 11	My family	12 lines

From the results we can see that whilst the mean number of lines increased over the semester, there were some topics which elicited better results; notably week 5 (My school), week 8 (My favorite celebrity), and week 11 (My family). Week 7 (The environment) elicited the smallest quantity of writing. Thus if my purpose was purely to elicit a quantity of writing, with which the students could work on grammar correction and other proof reading skills, topics very familiar to the students worked best. Unfortunately in standardized tests topics such as ‘the environment’ are far more common. Thus in order to prepare students for these tests the students should be introduced to topics for which they may not have much experience or schema. In the future I would probably start with personal topics and moving through the year, as students became more confident, introduce slightly more abstract social issues, which are very popular on standardized tests. The first topic should have been the easiest, but scored lowest. Partly this should be put down to lack of familiarity with the task, but by the third week I think the students were familiar with the task, but overall the scores kept on increasing. In the final week I deliberately chose ‘My family.’ I thought that this topic was closest to the first topic about ‘Me.’ The combination of familiarity with the task, familiarity with the topic and improvement over the semester did yield the largest amount of writing. Although it may have skewed my results, from a pedagogical point of view I wanted the students to end the semester feeling that they had improved.

## Discussion

As a writing class activity I feel that this was a big success. I would have liked students to write more, and there were a few students who still produced very little writing in 5 minutes. However, from my observations and student discussions at the end of the semester, I think that the students felt that their writing skills had improved. As stated at the beginning, writing must be a combination of fluency



and accuracy. Neglecting accuracy for the sake of fluency would be counter-productive, however if this free-writing can then be used as a heuristic or as a piece of writing which students can rewrite and improve, I think both aspects of the writing process can be improved. I would like to continue this activity for a longer period of time introducing more social topics mimicking some of the topics on the standardized tests, such as TOEIC and TOEFL.

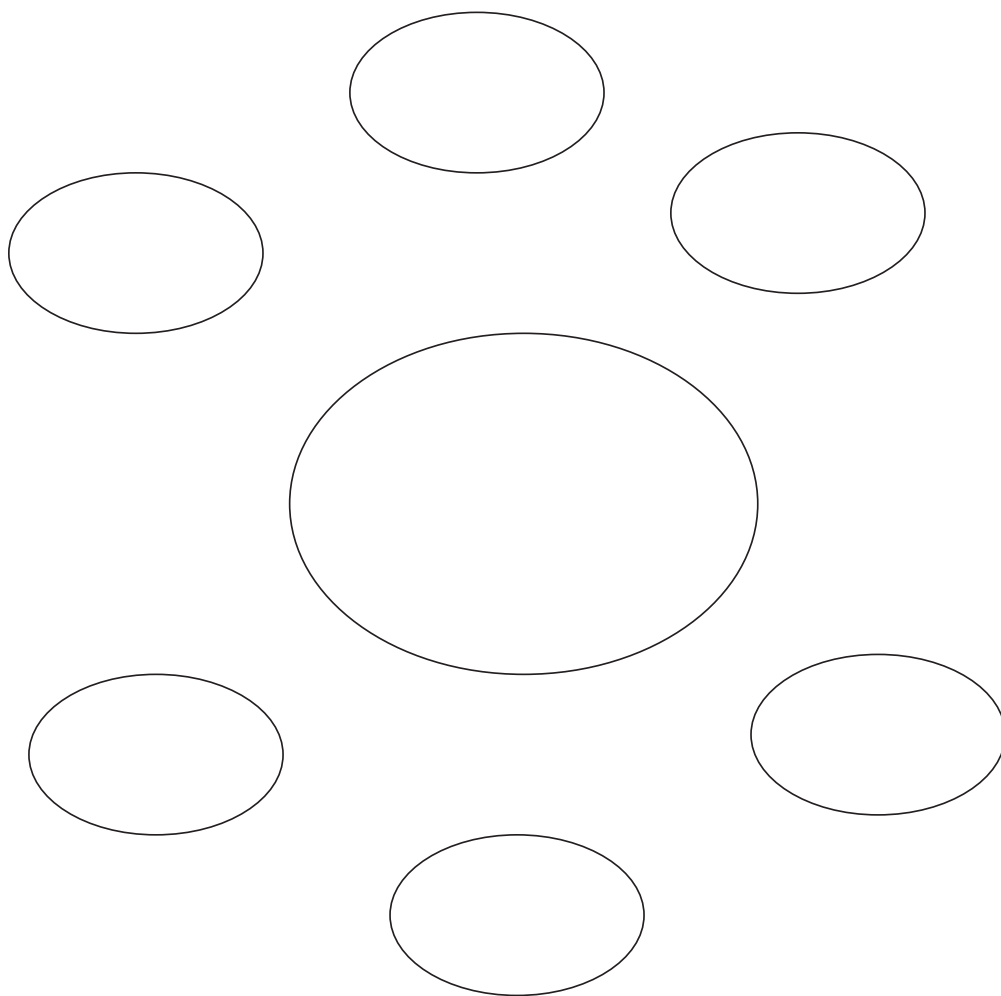
I would also consider giving students ten minutes writing time in the future, although time constraints in the classroom may make this difficult.

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**Appendix A: Mind map.**

## Appendix B

My family.....

[illegible]

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